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# NOTES ON THE CAAING WHALE

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## NOTES ON THE CAAING WHALE

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THESE miscellaneous notes on the caaing whale, *Globicephala melaena* Traill, and the communal whale-hunting of the Faeroe islanders are supplementary to the full accounts of this aspect of Faeroe life which have already appeared (Williamson, 1945 and 1948).

During the last week of July 1947 no less than three big whale-hunts, in which more than a thousand caaing whales were killed, took place in the Faeroes. I witnessed two of these, the first at the capital, Tórshavn, on 23rd July, when some 250 whales were converted into rather more than five kilos of meat for each of some 6,000 people; and another at Nordhratgøa, Eysturoy, embracing about 500 whales, on 26th July. On the day after the Tórshavn *grind* the island of Sudhuroy had its turn, 450 whales being driven ashore at the head of Trongisvágsfjörður, near the fishing port of Tvøroyri. The only whale-hunts during 1948 were very minor affairs at Tórshavn (there being insufficient meat for general distribution) and Klakksvík on the island of Bordhoy, the latter taking place in the autumn.

A novel feature of the 1947 *grind* at Tórshavn was that, for the first time in the history of Faeroe whaling, a mobile crane was used to haul the mammals out of the water and deposit them on the quay. At the head of the harbour, where there was plenty of room for manœuvring in an open space at the end of the main street, a tractor and wire hawser did the work of the crane. This mechanisation is not without a sociological significance, besides being a sign of the Faeroe-man's desire to keep abreast of the times, for in warm weather the whales decompose quickly, and the new saving in time and manpower assures that distribution will be completed whilst the meat is fresh.

As little seems to have been recorded on the colour of the



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PLATE 4.—Newly-born Caaing Whale on the quay at Tórshavn, Faeroe Islands.  
23rd July 1947.

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eye and mouth in the various species, it is perhaps worth while putting on record a few observations made at Tórshavn on the day of this hunt. In the eye of the caaing whale the sclerotic area is pinkish-white, the pupil is bright green, and the hazel-brown iris is lightly flecked with black. There is no eyelid, but there are small pleats in the skin above and below the eye, as shown in Fig. 1, which facilitate opening and closing. The interior of the mouth appears to be entirely black except for the tongue, which is dark flesh-colour, but these features were difficult to examine properly as *rigor mortis* had rendered the jaws practically immovable.

The flipper is quite noticeably angled on the anterior margin (Fig. 3 and Plate 5), and not an even curve as is shown in the plate of the young caaing whale prepared for Professor Murie's classic paper. The characteristic form, long and narrow, of this flipper in the adult is in marked and interesting contrast with the rounded, spatulate shape seen in the newly-born young (Plate 4), and which may well be the primitive form in *Globicephala*, as it more nearly approximates to the form of the flipper in the allied killer, *Orcinus orca* (L.), and false killer, *Pseudorca crassidens* (Owen).

The distribution of the white or greyish-white area on the ventral surface is well seen in Plate 5 (indicated also in Fig. 3); this is individually variable in extent, but substantially the pattern was the same in all cases, and fairly consistently so on the underside of the head. The greyish-white is sharply delimited in this region, but this is not so between the flippers and on the belly, along which the whitish band extends irregularly as far as the ventral groove.

Practically all the beasts had groups of several whitish lines, either straight or curved, running closely parallel to each other, conforming to no set pattern and quite unequally distributed on various parts of the body. Professor Flower's plate of *Grampus griseus* Cuv., and the reproduction of it in Millais' work, show these picturesque groups of markings well; they are at least as numerous and as diverse on most caaing whales, and I incline to the view that they are deep scratches caused by the teeth of other whales during fighting. The region around the mouth, in all the specimens examined, was pitted with the sucker-marks of the cuttlefish on which

these animals feed. Ectoparasites were looked for, but none was found.

Morphology now becomes the handmaid of folklore! Whilst I was making notes on the whales I was told by a



Fig. 1.  
DETAIL OF EYE

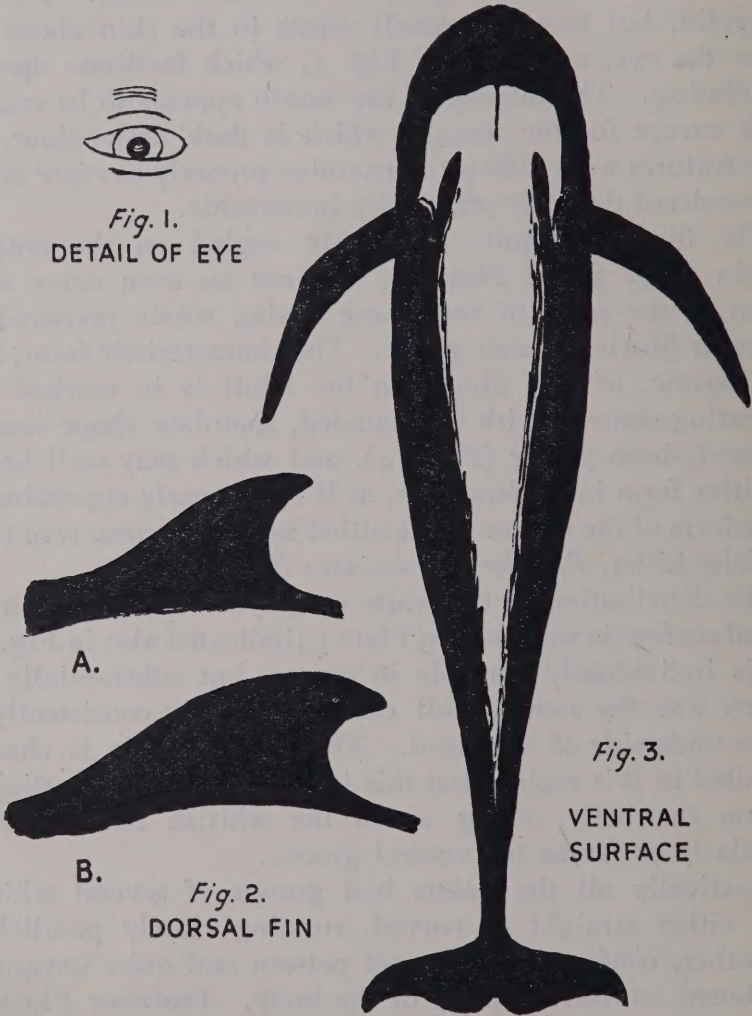


Fig. 2.  
DORSAL FIN

Fig. 3.  
VENTRAL  
SURFACE

FIGS. 1-3.—Details of Caaing Whale.

Faeroese that there are two kinds of caaing whale—one with a high, pointed dorsal fin (an example of which is to be seen on the left-hand side of Plate 5), and the other with a markedly falcate dorsal fin, wider at the base. There is certainly a good deal of variation in the shape of this fin, and although



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PLATE 5.—The *Metingarmenn* measuring and valuing a Caaing Whale,  
Tórshavn, Faeroe Islands.



two types (Fig. 2, A and B) are broadly recognisable it is not always easy to say to which type a particular individual belongs. On pursuing inquiries, I found that discrimination between the two among the *grindamenn* is quite general, and that type B with the *breidhahorn* ("wide horn") is said to occur sometimes in homogeneous schools. It is reputed to be more nervous and lively than type A, and when the school consists wholly or largely of *breidhahorn* whales it is very difficult to drive, and not infrequently eludes the hunters. This belief, implying a physiological difference correlated with the morphological one, is most interesting, and the Faeroeman's very extensive experience of these mammals demands that serious attention should be paid to this item of local lore.

There do not appear to be any other morphological distinctions, nor is the difference one of sex. Some consider that it is due to age as the majority of the *breidhahorn* type are large mammals, and therefore presumably older than the others; but it is interesting to note that in two cases I found big females with the wide falcate fin, to whose bodies foetuses having the same type of fin in miniature were still attached by the umbilical cord. These young were prematurely born, as they often are, when their dams were dying.

Dr Francis C. Fraser, to whom these miscellaneous notes were submitted, has sent me his own notes on the shape of the dorsal fin in members of a school of tropical caaing whales which he watched near the Cape Verde Islands in 1946. He recorded that "there was great variation in the shape of the dorsal fin. All those seen were falcate, but the hinder concavity was relatively shallow in some, whilst in others it approximated to the semicircular. The larger animals had the more pronouncedly falcate shape."

Plate 5 shows the *metingarmenn*, who are appointed by the district officer to measure and value the whales, at work on the Tórshavn quay, attended by the sheriff's officer, who records their observations. Noteworthy features of the foetus shown in Plate 4 are the short, rounded flipper and falcate dorsal fin (already mentioned), the semicircular blow-hole, and the prominent "beak."

My thanks are due to my father-in-law, Hr. Niels C. Rein,

of Tórshavn, for help in pursuing these inquiries; Dr Francis C. Fraser of the Department of Zoology, British Museum (Natural History), for reading these notes in typescript and allowing me to quote his own observations; and to the magazine *Picture Post* for their kindness in permitting the use of photographs taken by their staff photographer, Mr R. S. Kleboe, as Plates 4 and 5.

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The following item should be added to the literature of this fascinating aspect of whaling:—

- GREG, EDWARD HYDE., 1855. *A Narrative of the Cruise of the Yacht Maria among the Feroe Islands in 1854*. London.

This work, for a copy of which I am indebted to Colonel Alexander Greg of Westmill, Buntingford, Herts, and which was privately printed, contains a vivid eye-witness account of a whale-hunt at Vestmanna, in the north of Streymoy, and a fine coloured plate.

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